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Palm Beach Edition**Employee had sex with teen at shelter, police say****BYLINE:** Erika Pesantes, Wayne K. Roustan and Tonya Alanez, Staff writers**SECTION:** NEWS; Pg. 1A {ZONE} PN**LENGTH:** 836 words**DATELINE:** WILTON MANORS

-- It was meant to be a safe haven for abused and neglected children. But a longtime employee of Kids in Distress is accused of having sex multiple times with a teen girl who lived at the shelter, police said.

Brian Fields, 31, is the second man within a month to face felony charges for engaging in sexual activity with the same 15-year-old shelter resident.

"We have a zero tolerance policy for anything that interferes with the safety and care of our children on our campus," the agency's president, Mark Dhooge, said at a Thursday afternoon news conference. "Not only do we feel betrayed, we also feel significant responsibility to the community. We have been a trusted agency for over 35 years with an untarnished record."

Since 2003, Fields, of Lauderdale Lakes, worked a night shift at the agency's emergency shelter in the 800 block of Northeast 26th Street. He was terminated upon his arrest Wednesday, Dhooge said.

Charged with 12 counts of lewd and lascivious acts on a victim 12 to 16 years of age, Fields is being held in the Broward County Main Jail with bail set at \$120,000.

Police say the sex acts occurred four times between Dec. 27 and Jan. 6 and were consensual, but it is considered a crime because the teen is a minor.

The shelter is fully equipped with cameras, except in the bathrooms, Dhooge said, where the sexual activity allegedly took place.

Fields cleared a background screening upon hire, as well as annual ones and federal checks with fingerprinting every five years. He last underwent a local background screening on July 2 and a federal one on Jan. 31, Dhooge said.

The agency is vigorously investigating the incident and is reaching out to children who interacted with Fields during his tenure to determine if there was any other inappropriate activity, Dhooge said.

Fields allegedly performed sex acts and had intercourse with the girl, according to a police report that Broward County Judge John "Jay" Hurley read aloud at Fields' court hearing Thursday morning.

"During his employment, it's pretty apparent he took advantage of one of the children living there," Hurley said.

A woman who attended court in support of Fields declined to comment.

Another man, Brian Denby, 31, of Wilton Manors, is accused of jumping the fence at the shelter in the early morning hours of Jan. 7 and having sex with two girls, including Fields' alleged victim.

Fields' duties included monitoring the sleeping children and performing housekeeping duties. He worked the overnight shift with another person. She and one other child care worker have been fired in the aftermath of the arrests, Dhooge said.

It was while interviewing Denby's alleged victims that a social worker discovered that one of the girls also had allegedly been having sex with Fields. Both girls have been relocated to other shelters.

An anonymous tip led to Denby's arrest. Police took him into custody Jan. 28 aboard a ship at the Port of Miami after it returned from a weekend cruise to the Bahamas.

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Denby has been charged with three counts of lewd and lascivious battery on a child 12 to 15 years old and two counts of lewd or lascivious exhibition. He is jailed at the Paul Rein Detention Facility in Pompano Beach with bail set at \$250,000.

State Sen. Nan Rich, a Kids in Distress board member, said she was unaware of the latest arrest but would personally push for a thorough investigation.

"This is just totally unacceptable," Rich said from Los Angeles. "Kids has a wonderful reputation and they're, I believe, one of the finest child-welfare programs in our community. But sometimes something happens that makes you realize you have to go back and revisit your protocols and make sure you're doing everything to protect the children -- because that is the mission."

Officials at ChildNet, the nonprofit agency that refers children to the shelter, said they are evaluating the events.

"The care and safety of children in the child welfare system is our utmost concern," ChildNet spokeswoman, Elizabeth Wynter, said in a prepared statement Thursday afternoon. "We are getting the details from Kids in Distress and the police and will continue to monitor the situation and determine our next steps from there."

There are three other emergency shelters available to children in Broward County, Wynter said.

Kids in Distress provides services and programs for about 10,000 children a year. Its emergency shelter is licensed to serve as a refuge for up to 24 children at a time but averages about 10, Dhooge said.

In 2012, it took in about 218 abused children, according to the agency's annual report.

The agency has swiftly embarked on an overhaul of its training and security measures, Dhooge said.

"We've upped our training protocols in the shelter," Dhooge said. "And we've met with three security firms who are looking at all of our cameras, all of our lighting and reviewing our policy and procedure enhancements."

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Watch

See the suspect's court appearance at SunSentinel.

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distress

NOTES: < Informational box at end of text.

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